A Solution to the Pseudo-Problem of Other Minds

Philosophy of mind is famously full of strange creatures: philosophical zombies, colour-deprived super-scientists, brains inexplicably in vats, teleportation gone wrong. These thought experiments proliferate in our textbooks and classrooms. They are often presented as a rigorous and precise methodology, but many of them share an awkward problem: the more imaginative they become, the less they resemble the reality we all experience, and the more divorced they are from the actual empirical evidence we have available to us.

A simple classroom activity helps to illuminate this problem.

In my lesson, each student receives two cards from my philosophy-themed deck. Every card features a philosopher's name as well as a number. They do not look at their own cards until they are revealed. In round one, I only tell them the name of the philosopher on my card, which is quite random and bears no relation to the number on the card. Their task is to guess whether their card, which they have not seen, is numerically higher or lower than mine. They attempt to reason philosophically - perhaps Plato is "higher" than Hume, or perhaps Kant is "higher" than Mill. None of that reasoning helps them win the game, which is exactly the point. They are reasoning with the wrong kind of information, with the right information removed from the situation.

In the second round, I tell them the number of my card. Now their guesses become genuinely rational. Evidence is available, probabilities clarify, and their judgements become grounded and more reliable. The aim of this exercise is to support Russells' "Best Hypothesis" conclusion about what I consider to be a pseudo-problem of whether other people have minds. It goes further than Russell's pragmatic and common-sense assertion and reveals something all students of philosophy should be instructed in: when you remove the essential evidence from your judgement, you are left with guesswork and faulty reasoning. In the case of other minds, the card I have, so to speak, is a three, probably even a two, and the 'higher' prediction, that other people do indeed have minds, is one we can reliably choose.

This confidence is, after all, grounded in overwhelming empirical evidence. Other human beings share the same brain structures, the same patterns of behaviour, and the same evolutionary history as we do. The likelihood that, in spite of all those similarities, other people do not have minds is as slim as betting lower on a two. How else could we explain the facts? How else could we explain a complex brain structure that is near identical in structure and function, other than by assuming that its effect is to produce the same qualities and characteristics? How else could we explain the evolution of consciousness, with its survival benefits and apparent purpose, except by reliably assuming that all human beings have one?

David Chalmers has acknowledged that p-zombies are not conceivable in this world, since we know the mind to be evidently dependent on the brain. He therefore appeals to remote possible worlds in which they might exist. I disagree. A being with the same evolution, the same physical structure, and the same self-report of experience is, as close to certainly as anything can be, the same kind of being.

And yet the sceptic acts as if the card were a seven. *We can never know*, they say, so best not to even speculate about it. Of course we can never be certain - but does certainty of knowledge exist anywhere outside of mathematics and pure logic? The problem of other minds is sometimes presented as a fifty-fifty guess, like the toss of a coin. That would be a poor strategy in higher or lower, and arguably a poorer way to do philosophy.

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If such thought experiments are intended as illustrative analogies, then that is fine by me. They work in showing how mind and matter might be conceived as separate phenomena. But if their aim is philosophical insight, then they fail, because they are built on an approach to thought experiments that does not work. They are not grounded in experience, and they intentionally separate themselves from scientific understanding.

The Higher–Lower game reveals a simple lesson for philosophy: the quality of your reasoning depends on the quality of your information. This does not mean we should abandon thought experiments. They have an illustrative role, even if they do not convincingly fulfil an ontological purpose. If we force ourselves to forget the structural and functional brain similarities and the evolutionary history we all share, then we can question whether other people have minds, just as my students could randomly guess higher or lower based on nothing more than a philosopher's name. But if we are seeking true knowledge, why would we ignore the evidence right in front of us?